Fear of change? It Doesn’t Need to Be Overwhelming

by Tanuja Ramchal, (MBA 2003)

At the last Mentor for an Evening event, a graduating student confessed that she was anxious about making the transition to full-time work. She had accepted an offer from a well-known bank and was excited about the program she’d be joining in a few months. Yet, she had fears about what the change would mean.

Will I be able to stay connected with my friends from school?
How do I deal with the demands of a full-time job?
Will I have the flexibility to continue doing the things I enjoy?

The tendency is to believe that we shouldn’t have these concerns and feelings. That belief can trigger guilt and shame: Other people would kill for such an opportunity. Something must be wrong with me for thinking this way.

While we may try to hide the unpleasant emotions, it’s very normal to experience these feelings. This applies even to exciting changes -- starting your dream job, getting married, moving to a new city, or becoming a parent.

It can feel overwhelming to leave the familiar way of operating. But, as uncomfortable as the feelings may be, if what you’re moving towards is aligned with your goals, those feelings also serve as an indicator that you’re growing.

Still, how do you deal with the internal chaos change can set off?

As change consultant William Bridges describes in his transition model, there are three distinct phases you move through when faced with change. By processing the emotions which arise in each phase instead of avoiding them, you align your inner being with your outer reality. This leads to integration and success.

Phase 1: The ending
Every change necessitates endings and often requires stepping outside of your comfort zone. It’s critical to acknowledge what you’ll be giving up and put a plan in place to work through the uncertainty and fear. People who resist the emotions and are not willing to take this step stagnate.

Action: Make a list of the things that you believe you’ll have to leave behind, which are causing you anxiety. Look for ways to bring them with you. For example, brainstorm ideas to stay connected with friends even when you’re not going to see them regularly. For those things, you can’t take with you, acknowledge and deal with the loss by talking to someone you trust or journaling about it. This will help you move forward.

Phase 2: The in-between place
In this phase, the ending has been finalized but the new way of being is not yet established psychologically. It’s an adjustment period in which you’re learning the ropes and testing the waters. You’re continuing to step out of your comfort zone, which will most likely trigger confusion and fears. Here, it’s necessary to identify and take the steps to feel more confident and keep progressing.

Action: Remind yourself of your goals, and identify what you need to do in order to feel more stable. Then, take action, seek out support, and ask for help. You can sign up for training to feel more competent or schedule lunch with your colleagues to get to know them better.

Phase 3: The new beginning
You’re starting to see the fruits of your efforts and are feeling comfortable. It gets easier to take action and build on what you’ve created. In this phase, you want to make sure you’re avoiding complacency and boredom.

Action: Acknowledge how far you’ve come. Keep pushing the boundaries of your comfort zone to ensure you’re growing. Ask yourself what small steps you can take to be aligned with your long term goals, and prioritize the things which are important to you to get where you want to go. Celebrate your achievements, and keep moving forward.

Change can activate all kinds of uncomfortable feelings, but it’s through facing your emotions and taking action towards your goals in spite of how you feel that you realize your potential. By viewing change as a process, you can embrace the journey, one phase at a time.

As for that student transitioning to full-time employment, I received an email from her after our meeting. She now knows that her anxiety and fears are normal and to be expected given the circumstance. She’s putting a plan in place to confidently deal with the ending and make the most of the growth coming her way.

Tanuja Ramchal, Zicklin MBA 2003, founder of The Conscious Life Project, is an experienced change and transformation coach, speaker, and facilitator. She helps exceptional individuals who are unfulfilled have more freedom, fun, and purpose in their life and work. Tanuja is also a mentor in the Executives on Campus program and serves as an advisor at the Graduate Career Management Center at Baruch College. To learn more about Tanuja and for free personal development resources, visit TheConsciousLifeProject.com